

THE BLOG

JUNETEENTH : Roots of Enslavement, Roots of Liberation

🕒 06/19/2016 01:50 am ET | Updated 0 minutes ago



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Do you observe [Juneteenth](#)? As I write this, historian Kenneth C Davis has suggested that [Juneteenth is for everyone](#). For those just tuning in, Juneteenth (6/19) commemorates the end of slavery in the U.S. (Actually, it commemorates the occurrence in Texas, which took place two years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.) As I observe it this year, I happen to be considering it through the lens of Buddhism. Here's how.

Buddhism informs my sense of how cutting the roots of my suffering is inextricably bound up with suffering in society, in which I do live. And now that Buddha's way of liberation is entering into the mainstream, it's inspiring potent tools for white people interested in unpacking issues of race, as spiritual practice, in their own lives, and those of others.

To give you a sense of my own historical frame of reference here — Dharma and race have, for me, been intertwined for some time now. The first time I ever sat in silence with a group of humans was at a Quaker retreat. At that time, there were far more Buddhas sitting behind glass cases in museums, than teachers speaking living truth to Western listeners. And that silent meditation is still vivid for me today. (If you've never meditated, to join other human beings to do so is always good, I commend how the [Friends](#) go about it. No ritual, nor hierarchy. No strange bells or smells. Just do it! And Quakers don't just sit — they engage their spirituality in the world, for peace and justice.)

This was 1961. Do you remember, when [Freedom Riders](#) were boldly and nonviolently challenging America's [Jim Crow](#) South? At that retreat, I'd bunked with a black youth, who was enrolling in college in the South. The keynote speaker was [John Howard Griffin](#), a white man who temporarily changed the pigment of his skin and journeyed through the South to

experience being black.

That wanting to see for himself is resonant with foundational Buddhist wisdom. Truth isn't in books (nor blogs). Truth is only found in life as she is lived — real-time, first-hand, with an attentive, kindly attitude. Whatever you'd wish to understand, test it out within the laboratory of your own life. Is it true, or not? Discern what's nourishing for you and what's harmful; what's healing, and transformative

Seeing for one's self is also a way of breaking through the de-personalization of mass culture, in order to come at things authentically, in a flourishing way. So my own consideration of race is rooted in my own lived experience. This includes encountering my own privilege and biases ... microaggressions and structural violence ... identity-based suffering and racism in my own family and culture ... chains both mental and emotional, social and psychological ... contemplative practice ... and liberation.

Back in the Sixties, to black people, white people working for racial justice often seemed like incomprehensible allies. After all, what was in it for them?! Now, white folks are learning to be allies more genuinely. Here are just two recent examples, from the Buddhist community. This May, a small group from the [Mindful Peacebuilding](#) community visited sites in Louisiana, including [the Whitney plantation](#), America's first museum of slavery. Quoting from their website, they tell us:

Our intention: to honor the ancestors at a site of major historical harm and suffering, and through deep looking and deep listening help to open pathways for individual and collective healing, transformation, and compassionate action. We were of African-American, Caribbean-American, Vietnamese, white European Jewish, and white Northern European ancestry.

This pilot journey successfully tested the concept of going on a retreat to learn from insights arisen in encountering external and internal roots of enslavement and roots of liberation. [To be continued.]

For a second example, we turn to Christopher Raiche, president of the Harvard Buddhist Community. Last year, he organized Harvard's first conference on *Buddhism and Race in America*. This spring, he published [a sharp, probing, personal essay](#) in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. This probative inquiry has patches of rawness which only further its convincingness. I mean, his courageous vulnerability speaks to the sincerity of his heart. and makes the piece all the more truthful and fruitful for others. And I am inspired to witness a new generation standing on the shoulders of those who've come before, and lifting all of us up with them.

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if I may, I'd like to finish out with just a couple more observations or now Dharma (Buddhist teachings) usefully opens onto this theme, and also to place in your hands some beneficial resources.

In doing one's homework on race. and acting upon it skillfully, a kindly attitude is key. Seeing with eyes of compassion means beginning with compassion for myself first. Otherwise compassion, however well-intended, can be ineffective, and even unpleasant.

And, have you heard the word: "intersectionality"? This is the definition that's the top entry for it if you google the word:

the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

"through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us"

For Buddhists, it's an example of a fundamental tenet: interconnectedness. As naturalist John Muir reminds us, tug on one thread and we find it connected to everything else in the universe. Following this out with people, we find bias towards race overlaps with gender ... class ... and so on. So to touch the historical dimension deeply, we find ourselves in the ultimate dimension, of selflessness. (And vice-versa. Touching the ultimate dimension deeply, we find ourselves in the historical dimension as well.) Then all lives really matter. Then we connect with life itself. Then we can keep it real.

Good news.

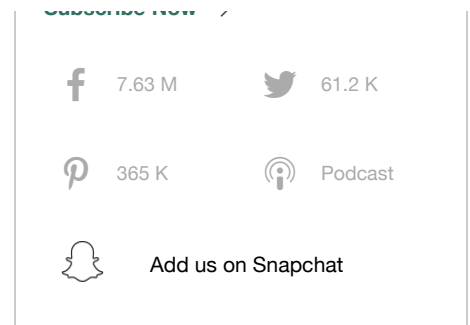
Vital resources for studying race in your own life are available. And you don't have to be Buddhist, to enjoy them! —Do you know the difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists?

Non-Buddhists think there's a difference.

Together, we are one.

...

A video such as Cracking the Codes ... a book such as What Does It Mean To Be White? ... a website such as [White Awake](#) plus a couple of good articles, are enough for getting started. Here are two major collections of vital



resources:

- [Blue Cliff Monastery](#) has woven an excellent collection.
- [Call To White Buddhists](#) includes further resources, within four areas of inquiry and action.

And here are two recent resources:

- in 2015, a national panel presented [Where Spirit & Action Meet: Continuing the Legacy of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh & Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)
- This March, Charles Johnson and Lama Choyin Rangdrol fell into a deep, public dialogue, entitled [Black America: A Global Perspective](#).

Additional books

Charles Johnson: *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories & Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, & Spiritual Practice*.

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel: *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, & Gender*.

Lama Choyin Rangdrol: *Black Buddha: Changing the Face of American Buddhism*

Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, PhD
Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation.

Jan Willis: *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist*.

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Thank you Christopher Raiche for pointing out a recent post here of a similar spirit by Marisela B. Gomez "

" Spiritual Bypass Bypasses Justice: Can We Make Buddhist Communities More Authentic? "
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